**The Todd Family Divided**

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In the years of the Civil War many families found themselves divided between the Union and the Confederate states. Brother fought brother in this time of national crisis. These divides affected the lives of people all the way up to the White House. Mary Todd Lincoln found that many of her siblings became her enemies as the war progressed. Of her eleven siblings, including half siblings, seven either joined the Confederate army or married men loyal to the South. Of these siblings, her youngest half sister Emilie Helm was the hardest on Mary. The loss of Emilie to the Confederates turned out to have a great effect on both Mary and her husband.

Before the war began Emilie and her husband were close friends of the Lincolns. Mary had always been close to her sister and, during their time in Springfield, Lincoln became good friends with her husband, Ben Helms. The two discussed the politics of the time. Ben was a West Point graduate who had his roots in Kentucky. By the time the Lincolns left for the White House in 1861 the President called Emilie his "Little Sister." During this time Mary looked forward to the time she thought she and Emilie would spend together at the White House, but these dreams were shattered with the beginning of the war.

At the start of the war Lincoln was afraid that Helm would join with his southern friends. To try and keep him in the North, for both his military knowledge and for fear of the reaction that Mary would have if Emilie left for the South, Lincoln offered to make him the paymaster in the Union army and bestow upon him the rank of major. Though

Helm did consider the position, he decided in the end to stay loyal to his old southern friends; however, he did consider the decision to be one of the most painful in his life. Ben became a brigadier general and the two temporarily faded out of the Lincolns' lives. This changed two years later when Ben was mortally wounded in the Battle of Chickamauga in September of 1863. A letter to President Lincoln from Emilie's stepmother brought the sisters back together.

The letter asked if Emilie could cross Union lines to attend her husband's funeral. Lincoln of course gave permission, but when Emilie reached the line they tried to make her pledge allegiance to the Union army. She refused, finding the act treasonous to her dead husband. After hearing of the problem, Lincoln wrote to have Emilie sent to the White House. Emilie Helm arrived in November of 1863 pregnant and accompanied by her daughter. She was dressed entirely in black, the garb of a mourning widow, but she was generally happy to see her sister. The first few weeks of the sisters' reunion were filled with happiness as they caught up with one another, but soon their political differences came between them. It was hard for Emilie to be comfortable in a Union setting when it was the Union men who killed her beloved husband.

At first the Lincolns tried to avoid having her at banquets. In many ways they were embarrassed that they had a Confederate loyalist in the White House and they were afraid of what she would do if she met any of the officers who frequented the gatherings. Their fears were soon recognized when the Lincolns were hosting two Union generals, one of which was Daniel E. Sickles. The General was surprised to find a Confederate in the home of the President. After commenting on the matter he received a reply from Emilie stating, "If I had twenty sons, they would all be fighting yours." Outbursts like

these eventually forced Lincoln to send Emilie back to Kentucky without a loyalty pledge in order to end the humiliation caused by her political views.

Even once she was home she did not leave the Lincolns alone. She sent a second letter to Lincoln asking if she could again cross Union lines to sell cotton to get money for her family. She figured she could use her family ties to the political power to get ahead in the cotton market. When Lincoln received the letter he replied that he would not give her a pass since she was a Confederate and would not give her loyalty to the Union cause. Though this was, of course, the logical answer that he would have supplied to anyone asking with a similar request, Emilie became very angry and made sure that Lincoln knew it in her reply which blamed him for the death of her siblings and her husband. After reading this hateful letter directed at her husband, Mary was enraged and the two sisters never spoke to one another again.

The war had stretched what had once been a very close relationship to its breaking point. The two women ended up with two opposing views, which could not be mixed. Through these trying times Lincoln was continually afraid of what would happen if the two women broke ties with one another. He was worried that this would cause Mary to sink deeper into her depression, but the separation did not have the effect on her psychological problems that he had expected. Instead it pulled her tighter into the Union. Previously she had not truly believed in freedom for the black slaves. She had grown up in the South and still held the southern prejudices that black people were inferior. She was even known to apologize to Emilie for that part of the Union quest. Following her encounters with her less than grateful sister, Mary found herself believing more fully in the entirety of the Union goals. While arguing over politics with her sister, she

discovered what her husband was fighting for and began to fully back his war. Mary never seemed to look back on the frayed relationship. She saw Emilie as a traitor and that was that. She lost all respect and sympathy for her sister when she would not join the Union fight. She was even quoted as saying in relation to her siblings, "Why should I sympathize with the Rebels? They would hang my husband tomorrow if it was in their power." [From Jean Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln*; Jerrold Packard, *Lincolns in the White House*; Ruth Randall, *Mary Todd Lincoln*; William Davis, Brian Pohanka, and Don Troiani, eds., *Civil War Journal*.]